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General and complete disarmament: observance of environmental norms in the drafting and implementation of agreements on disarmament and arms control

Observance of environmental norms in the drafting and implementation of agreements on disarmament and arms control

Report of the Secretary-General

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I. Introduction

1. On 20 November 2000, the General Assembly adopted resolution 55/33 K, entitled "Observance of environmental norms in the drafting and implementation of agreements on disarmament and arms control", operative paragraph 4 of which reads as follows:

> "*Invites* all Member States to communicate to the Secretary-General information on the measures they have adopted to promote the objectives envisaged in the present resolution, and requests the Secretary-General to submit a report containing this information to the General Assembly at its fifty-sixth session."

2. Pursuant to that request, the Secretary-General, on 4 April 2001, addressed a note verbale to Member States inviting them to provide information on the subject. The replies received are reproduced in chapter II below. Any other replies received will be issued as addenda to the present report.

II. Replies received from Governments

A. Bangladesh

[Original: English]
[17 April 2001]

Bangladesh fully shares the objective of the said resolution and has been contributing to this in relevant multilateral forums. However, it may be mentioned that, at the national level, the issue is not relevant for Bangladesh.

B. Dominican Republic

[Original: Spanish]
[6 June 2001]

The Dominican Republic established a State Secretariat on the Environment which, among other measures, clearly demonstrates the country's commitment to ensuring the application of scientific and technological progress in the framework of international security, disarmament and other related spheres, as well as in the domestic sphere, without detriment to the protection of the environment as it relates to sustainable development.

C. Iraq

[Original: Arabic]
[29 May 2001]

United Nations resolutions have affirmed that all countries must contribute fully, by the measures they take, to ensuring compliance with environmental norms in the implementation of treaties and conventions. The observance of environmental norms has also become a key element in the preparation and implementation of international disarmament and arms limitation agreements, and it has become

necessary for the international community and its organizations to pursue this important matter in accordance with the agreements adopted at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development as well as other, prior agreements.

A rapid examination of compliance with this obligation over the past decade indicates that two countries that are permanent members of the Security Council, namely the United States and the United Kingdom, have on many occasions openly and deliberately violated their obligations under the United Nations resolutions on environmental protection. They likewise violated their obligations under the disarmament and arms limitation agreements by using more than 800 tons of munitions containing depleted uranium in their 1991 aggression against Iraq. In 1999 they used them again, this time in Kosovo against Yugoslavia, despite their prior knowledge of the catastrophic damage the use of this radiological weapon does to health and to the environment in the areas in which it is used.

A high-density depleted-uranium projectile is made of radioactive nuclear waste left over from the manufacture of nuclear fuel and nuclear bombs. On impact with the target, such a projectile produces a chemical and radiological dust that not only contaminates the target site itself but is carried long distances by the wind, spreads over wide areas and contaminates air, water, soil, plants and man for generations to come, given that the half-life of depleted uranium is 4.5 billion years. This illustrates the dimensions of the catastrophe that is caused by the use of a weapon that has massively destructive power. When a person is exposed to depleted-uranium radiation, it first affects the kidneys, the liver, the immune system and the reproductive system, and it causes birth defects and many kinds of cancer. According to the estimates of the United States Department of Defense, 326,000 pounds of depleted-uranium munitions were used against Iraqi forces in a total of 780,000 rounds. The widespread and indiscriminate use of this terrifying weapon has resulted in a sharp increase in cases of cancer, miscarriages, nervous disorders, foetal deformities and birth defects among civilians in Iraq, especially in the southern governorates that served as the theatre of operations in which this dreadful weapon was used.

In the first year after it was used, depleted uranium caused the deaths of some 50,000 Iraqi children from various diseases, most significantly cancer of the blood (leukaemia). Even the United States and British forces did not escape infection with many diseases caused by their exposure to depleted-uranium radiation.

With regard to the effects in the field of the use of depleted uranium by NATO forces in Kosovo in 1999, the report of the scientific mission of the United Nations Environment Programme on its visit to Kosovo from 5 to 19 November 2000, entitled "Depleted uranium in Kosovo", states that the greater part of the 10 tons of depleted-uranium projectiles used in Kosovo may be buried deep in the soil and that one of the effects of depleted uranium on the local population is its possible exposure to concentrations of uranium in the water supply when depleted-uranium munitions are broken up by water in the soil. If the uranium levels remain as they are or if they rise in future to levels of concentration higher than those identified by the local authorities, then there are two possibilities; either to avoid using the wells in question as a source of drinking water or to treat the water using a system of filters that extracts the uranium.

The report goes on to say that, one year after the ground was contaminated with depleted uranium, there is a possibility of absorbing uranium by consuming fruit and vegetables that were contaminated, or that became contaminated indirectly by absorbing depleted uranium through their roots, or by consuming milk and meat from animals that have eaten contaminated grass or have been contaminated by the soil.

In another respect, information has become available that indicates that United States and British forces maintain a large stock of depleted-uranium munitions at their bases and on board their war fleets in the Arabian Gulf. There is also well-documented information, which has been confirmed by United States military circles, that United States forces have buried equipment contaminated with depleted uranium in Kuwait. This portends an environmental and health catastrophe in the Arabian Gulf region if urgent measures are not taken to withdraw these weapons from it and if a start is not made on an urgent plan to cleanse the region's environment of the effects of the contamination caused by the use and storage of depleted uranium.

The international community, as represented by the United Nations and the Conference on Disarmament, must make a serious effort to conclude an international agreement prohibiting the use of depleted uranium in armaments, and it must strengthen the international agreements in effect with supplementary measures to deter those that fail to respect environmental norms.

D. Lebanon

[Original: Arabic]
[14 June 2001]

Lebanon does not possess any weapons that have an impact on the environment or that damage it and it supports the international agreements on disarmament and arms limitation.

E. Mexico

[Original: Spanish]
[16 May 2001]

1. Mexico observes the environmental provisions contained in the disarmament and arms control agreements and maintains a similar respect for instruments in this area that are still under negotiation.

2. In line with the preamble to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Final Document adopted by consensus at the Sixth Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty, Mexico considers it essential to underline the danger of a nuclear war and the devastation it would cause and reiterates its commitment to reducing the risk of such a possibility by the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.

3. Mexico therefore considers that the constant refinement of nuclear weapons and the role of such weapons in the security systems of those who possess them

remain issues that Mexico and the international community should, with renewed determination, seek to end as a matter of priority.

4. Mexico has emphasized the role of the International Atomic Energy Agency in achieving the objective of protecting the world environment by highlighting the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes in the context of sustainable development.

5. Mexico is also in favour of promoting nuclear and radiological security, regulations for the safe transport of radioactive materials, the highest standards of environmental protection, and radiation and nuclear safety in the conversion of nuclear material to peaceful uses.

F. Suriname

[Original: English]
[16 May 2001]

Suriname has the honour to inform, on behalf of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Suriname, that no activities have been carried out with regard to this subject matter.